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Minton, Stephen

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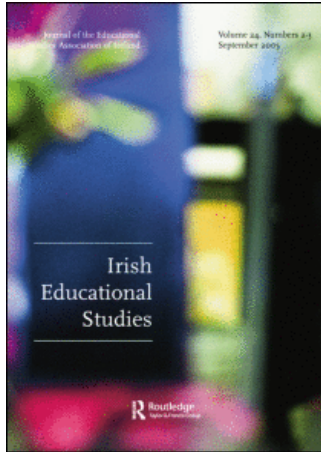
Irish Educational Studies

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Stephen James Minton<sup>a</sup>; Torunn Dahl<sup>a</sup>; Astrid Mona O' Moore<sup>a</sup>; Donnely Tuck<sup>a</sup>  
<sup>a</sup> School of Education, Trinity College Dublin,

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## **An exploratory survey of the experiences of homophobic bullying among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered young people in Ireland**

Stephen James Minton\*, Torunn Dahl, Astrid Mona O' Moore, and  
Donnelly Tuck

*School of Education, Trinity College Dublin*

While developments have been made concerning the understanding of general bullying behaviour in Irish schools, considerably less is known about homophobic bullying. Presented here are the findings of a study into the views and perspectives of a self-selected sample of 123 lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) secondary school-aged young people in Ireland. Findings highlight the extent to which such students experience name calling, teasing and bullying in their everyday lives. While exploratory in nature, the study indicates (i) the LGBT population is one 'at risk' of school bullying; (ii) homophobic bullying should be included as a matter of concern in pre-service and in-service teacher training; (iii) that homophobic bullying should be explicitly considered in school anti-bullying policy. Furthermore, from a consideration of the current level of expertise, there are grounds for optimism regarding the development of an inter-agency approach to providing resources and addressing curriculum development in this area in schools in Ireland.

**Keywords:** bullying; homophobia; LGBT; young people; Irish schools

### **Introduction: bullying behaviour among young people in the Republic of Ireland**

Europe-wide, the last twenty years has seen considerable advances in levels of awareness about the incidence and typology of bullying behaviour among young people (Smith et al. 1999; Smith 2003), and also some inroads into the methods by which such behaviour may be countered (Smith, Pepler and Rigby 2004). Ireland is no exception (O' Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; O' Moore and Minton 2004). For example, a representative nationwide survey of bullying behaviour in Irish schools was undertaken in the period 1993–1994. Involving 20,442 pupils (drawn from 10% of the primary schools and 27% of the post-primary schools in each of the twenty-six counties), the study revealed the prevalence of bullying behaviour in Irish schools at both primary and post-primary level with 31.3% of primary school pupils and 15.6% of post-primary pupils reporting having been victimised within the last term; 26.5% of primary school pupils and 14.9% of post-primary pupils reported that they had bullied others within the last term (O' Moore, Kirkham and Smith 1997).

More recently, Norman and his colleagues (Norman 2004; Norman and Galvin 2006; Norman, Galvin and McNamara 2006) asserted that homophobic bullying is *not* simply another type of bullying, but is linked to prevailing negative attitudes

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [mintonst@tcd.ie](mailto:mintonst@tcd.ie)

towards people of non-heterosexual sexual orientation. It should be noted that prior to Norman et al.'s recent publications, precious little quantitative data existed with regards to the extent and nature of homophobic bullying in Irish schools.

## **What is known about homophobic bullying**

### ***Definitional issues***

Overall, *homophobia* is described as 'the fear of being labelled homosexual and the irrational fear, dislike or hatred of gay males and lesbians' (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1998; cited in Norman, Galvin, and McNamara 2006: 36). In Ireland, the most widely used definition of *bullying* among young people is that offered by the Department of Education and Science (1993):

Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against others.

Norman, Galvin, and McNamara (2006: 43) quote, with approval, a UK definition of homophobic bullying, which we also find to be acceptable:

Homophobic bullying takes place where general bullying behaviour such as verbal and physical abuse and intimidation is accompanied by or consists of the use of terms such as gay, lesbian, queer or lezzie by perpetrators. (Warwick et al. 1997).

### ***Some important research findings to date***

Setting these definitional issues aside for the time being, it should be noted that research has begun into homophobic bullying in earnest. Indeed, in Australia, serious attempts to make inroads into the prevention of violence against lesbians and gay men through legislative and educational policy provisions date back to 1990 (Mason 1993). In terms of incidence rates, a 1999 survey in the United States found that 69% of LGBT students said they were harassed, and 14% said the harassment was violent (Chang and Kleiner 2001).

Research in the UK suggests that although teachers are aware of both verbal and physical homophobic bullying, the needs of lesbian and gay pupils may remain unaddressed (Warwick et al. 2001). In a study of 307 schools throughout England and Wales (Douglas et al. 1999) found that an 'awareness of general bullying among school staff was almost universal' (Douglas et al. 1999: 53) – 82% of teachers were aware of instances of homophobic verbal bullying and 26% were aware of homophobic physical bullying. Common reasons cited for not addressing the problem were parental disapproval (18%), a lack of experienced staff (17%) and a lack of policy (16%).

Thurlow (2001) looked at pejoratives used in English and Welsh secondary schools. He found that homophobic pejoratives accounted for 10% of the 600 pejoratives generated by the secondary school pupils surveyed. However, these pejoratives were rated much less seriously than racist pejoratives, indicating that homophobic pejoratives were seen as more acceptable. Similarly, in Iowa, a study among high school students recorded that the average high-school pupil hears anti-gay epithets around 25 times per day, and that teachers who hear those words fail to respond 97% of the time (Flannery 1999; cited in Chang and Kleiner 2001). Several

researchers have pointed out that name-calling is a very frequent form of homophobic bullying, but that it is not necessarily targeted at lesbian or gay pupils. Rather, it is used to refer to anything that does not fit the norms of masculine or feminine, and is used to build in-group and out-group identity (Thurlow 2001; Sharpe 2002; Warwick et al. 2001). Duncan (1999) undertook a study in four post-primary schools in central England, via a series of interviews with year 7 (11–2 year olds) and year 10 (14–15 year olds) students. In each school, he found that a virulent homophobia permeated from the older boys down throughout the entire school pupil community. Conformity to the heteronormative pupil culture was rigidly enforced through both discourse and the imminent threat of physical violence.

In Ireland, too, the use of homophobic banter among adolescent males has been noted (Collins 1999; Mac an Ghaill 1994, Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004; O' Moore and Minton 2004) as a cause for concern. Similarly, Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway (2004) draw attention to a form of 'policing' the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity among Irish teenaged boys that is similar to that revealed by Duncan's (1999) studies in England. In their advice to young people, O' Moore and Minton (2004) acknowledge that while homophobic epithets are not always meant literally (c.f. Thurlow 2001; Sharpe 2002; Warwick et al. 2001), that they are always unacceptable. They conclude their advice on this matter: 'Please remember that whether someone is homosexual or heterosexual is their own business, and that people should never be bullied or treated badly because they are homosexual' (O'Moore and Minton 2004: 75).

### ***Possible sub-types of homophobic bullying***

Homophobic bullying, it would seem, may be divided into two sub-types. First, there is the type of homophobic bullying that underpins the (often aggressive) heteronormativity of the school environment (i.e., the type described by Duncan 1999; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004; Thurlow 2001 above). It should be noted that while not targeting lesbian and gay pupils directly, it certainly has an impact on them. A study in the United States found that lesbian and gay young people were two to three times more likely to commit suicide than other young people (Warwick et al. 2001). Additionally, it would appear that this form of abuse is rarely challenged by teachers or other pupils and that together with the silence or taboo around discussing homosexuality, tends to perpetuate the normalisation of heterosexuality and the acceptance of homophobic bullying in schools (Atkinson 2002; Buston and Hart 2001). We could term this first and somehow more indirect, or at least, 'non-directed' or 'environmental' sub-type '*heteronormative bullying*'.

The second type of homophobic bullying involves the active persecution of known LGBT persons. One hardly needs to construct a specific term, although '*sexual orientation-based bullying*' may suffice. As far as the recorded incidence of this second sub-type of homophobic bullying goes, a study in Great Britain by Stonewall (1999) found that an astonishing 93% of lesbian and gay young people who are 'out' at school suffer verbal abuse. In Northern Ireland, YouthNet (2004) found that 44% of LGBT youths had been bullied at school as a result of their sexual orientation. Sadly, these people made up over half of all respondents who had self-harmed and attempted suicide. Hence, the type of impact that sexual orientation-based bullying has on those targeted cannot be underestimated.

### **Homophobic bullying in schools in the Republic of Ireland**

As noted, until very recently, little was known about the prevalence or typology of homophobic bullying in schools in Ireland. Mac an Ghaill (2006: vii) points out that while the Equal Status Acts of 2001 and 2004 (Office of the Attorney General 2006) have, through outlawing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the workplace, 'increased positive recognition of gay and lesbian adults' that paradoxically, 'a strange silence, covert complicity or explicit acceptance of sexual discrimination against children' currently co-exists. Mac an Ghaill (2006: viii), recognising that 'homophobia is one of the most divisive and destructive features of contemporary society and yet for a long time one of the least recognised' therefore welcomed a recent report by Norman and Galvin (2006), who investigated 725 SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) teachers' views and perceptions of homophobic bullying. Norman, and Galvin (2006) found that 79% of the teachers were aware of verbal homophobic bullying, and that 16% were aware of physical bullying related to homophobia, 90% of the teachers responded that their school's anti-bullying policy did not cover homophobic bullying. That this research was funded by government agencies is encouraging in terms of interest in the area.

A further positive development over recent years has been the establishment of the BeLonG To Youth Project, 'Ireland's first and only designated lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth project' (Barron and Collins 2005: 7). Operational since 2002, it is funded by the Department of Education and Science, and provides both one-to-one and group-based support for young LGBT people. Similarly, GLEN (the gay and lesbian equality network), founded in 1987, has funding from the Health Services Executive to 'promote awareness and develop responses to the factors that lead to poor mental health among lesbian and gay people' (Barron and Collins 2005: 7). Both organisations have been active in providing support services to vulnerable young LGBT people concerning an array of their needs, including bullying and suicidality.

The primary aim of the present study was to be able to explore and quantify the extent of having been a target of homophobic bullying among a self-selecting sample of secondary school-aged LGBT students in Ireland. A further aim was to gather data on the experiences of young LGBT Irish people in terms of coming out and finding support. The study extends previous research in the area by identifying students' perspectives and views. It should be noted that the nature of the sample does indeed pose certain limitations for the study, and the wider interpretation of its results. The sample was self-selecting; that is to say, responses to a targeted invitation to take part in the study. Naturally, such a sample does not permit generalisation to the larger population, as it is not a probability-based sample. Furthermore, self-selecting samples, by their very nature, may encourage the participation of those who have strong views about/definite experiences of the phenomenon under consideration, thus skewing the data in the direction of 'false positives'.

The 'self-selecting' strategy was adopted in the first place because a random selection strategy based on the normal population would have involved asking school students about both bullying (some schools are reluctant, no matter what measures are taken around anonymity, to let their students take part (Minton and O'Moore 2008)) and their sexual orientation. Given Norman, Galvin, and McNamara's experiences in 2004, we had every reason to expect that at least a significant

number of the students themselves and the schools to which they belonged might have objected to questions regarding the latter (Norman, Galvin, and McNamara 2006).<sup>1</sup> On balance, as the title suggests, the survey is argued only to be exploratory in nature, and has permitted the voices of the participants who volunteered to take part to be heard for the first time, and also for certain methodologies to be tested, with a view to more extensive research in the future.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The full survey was completed by 90 young people (age range 15 to 31 years), with an additional 33 respondents partially completing it. A 'pen and paper' version was completed by 31 respondents in Dublin and Cork. An 'on-line' version was completed by 92 respondents geographically dispersed throughout the Republic of Ireland. The majority of respondents (95%) identified themselves as being LGBT or unsure of their sexual orientation.

### ***Materials***

Contact was established with the 'BeLonG To' youth group in Dublin (a high profile provider of youth services to LGBT young people), in order to discuss how best to collect data on homophobic bullying. Based on these discussions, it was agreed to use a survey which would be available in a pen and paper version at the 'BeLonG To' premises and an electronic version that could be completed online. A survey was developed based on a questionnaire used in the nationwide survey (O' Moore, Kirkham and Smith, 1997), and the Donegal primary schools anti-bullying programme (O'Moore and Minton 2005). Additionally, LGBT-specific questions were added, based on a questionnaire used in research in Northern Ireland (YouthNet 2004). The draft survey was then reviewed, by 'BeLonG To', to check for the appropriateness of the questions for the LGBT community.

### ***Procedure***

Once the survey was finalised, an online version was created using the survey builder company at [www.freeonlinesurveys.com](http://www.freeonlinesurveys.com). A banner was created carrying the message, 'Are you a secondary school student this year? Please help us to investigate homophobic bullying by completing our survey'. The banner was put up on the front page of three different websites from mid-June 2006 to the end of July 2006. The first website was [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org), a website specifically aimed at LGBT youth. The second website was [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie), an Irish website aimed at young people in general. The third website to host the banner was [www.abc.tcd.ie](http://www.abc.tcd.ie), the website of the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at Trinity College. In addition pen and paper versions of the survey were left at the BeLonG To premises in Dublin and distributed to Unite's premises in Cork (an LGBT youth group). Given that this project was undertaken during the school holiday period, no further promotion campaigns were engaged in to promote the survey.

# Results

All results are given based on the number of respondents for each particular question. The questionnaire was completed by 14 females (11.4% of the sample), 102 males (82.9%) and seven young people (5.7%) who identified as belonging to neither gender. The sexual and gender orientation of the respondents is shown in Table 1, below:

Table 1. Respondents profiles by sexual and gender orientation

Sexual orientation	Neither male/ female*	Male	Female	Total number	Total %
Lesbian	0	0	3	3	2.5
Gay	3	77	0	80	65.6
Bisexual	2	17	7	26	21.3
Heterosexual	1	3	2	6	4.9
Unsure	0	5	2	7	5.7
Total	6	102	14	122	100

\* = 1 missing.

A total of 10 respondents (8.1%) identified themselves as being transgendered. The ages of the respondents ranged from 15 to 31. Although the questionnaire was primarily aimed at secondary school pupils, 16 respondents were over the age of 19 years. Presumably, these respondents desired to contribute to the research on homophobic bullying in general, and will have made qualitative and quantitative responses regarding life as a LGBT individual in Ireland today. Hence, a decision was undertaken not to exclude these responses.

The respondents were spread across eighteen different counties across the four historic provinces, although 20 respondents (16.3%) chose to specify simply that they lived in the Republic of Ireland, but not which county. The majority of the respondents came from Dublin (39.8%) and Cork (15.4%). Four fifths of the respondents lived in urban as opposed to rural areas. Five respondents (4.1%) stated that they had a disability. Six respondents reported themselves as being from an ethnic minority; and further analysis revealed that all but one of these originated in other western European countries.

When respondents were asked about their attitudes to school and how safe they felt on the way to/from school, their responses covered a full spectrum of feelings. These are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below. It can be seen that over a fifth of the respondents (22%) did not feel safe on their way to and from school.

Respondents were asked questions about how they got on with other students at school in terms of various events that may have happened to them over the past three months. Their responses are shown in Table 2.

Despite the recent media coverage of cyber-bullying, this appears to be the form of negative act least frequently experienced by respondents. Bullying around race and religion were also uncommon, perhaps unsurprisingly given that 99% of respondents are of Irish/West European ethnicity.

Verbal abuse in general was frequently (weekly/daily) experienced by approximately one-third (32.1%) of respondents, with verbal abuse around their sexuality having been frequently experienced by slightly more respondents (34.3%). Indirect



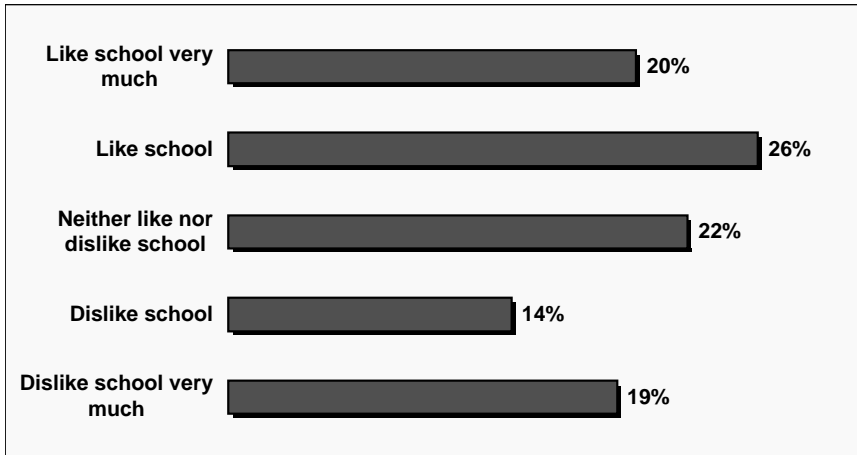


Figure 1. Feelings about school

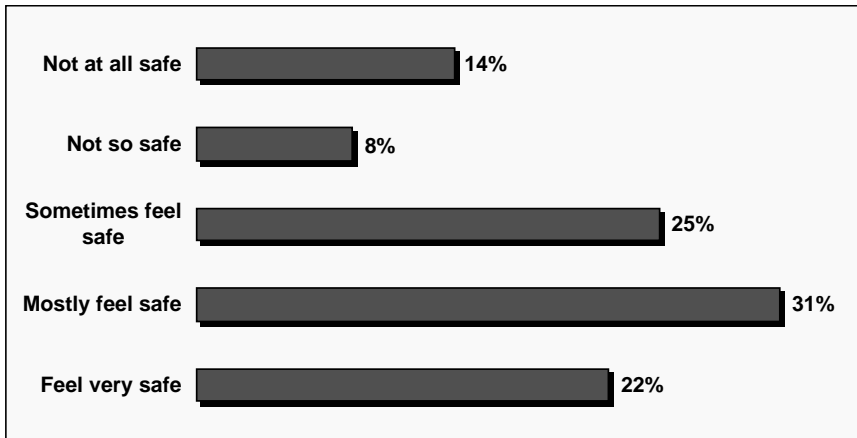


Figure 2. Feelings about safety going to/from school

verbal bullying through the spreading of rumours and lies about an individual was frequently experienced by 25% of the respondents.

Respondents were asked to tell us more about the name calling around their sexuality if they wished. Below are some of the comments that they made:

Homophobic attitudes are very prevalent in all-boys schools, irrespective of your sexual preference.

I was bullied mostly in school, but not in college.

In college everyone is far more accepting.

I get racism from some other boys here – in my home country I was attacked for being gay.

I know the whole school is gossiping about me.

There was a club on Bebo started about me.

They said it in a joking, yet nasty, way.

Table 2. Experiences at school to which respondents had been subjected over the past three months

Event	N	Not in last 3 mths	Now & again	Once a week	Once a day
Been physically hurt e.g. kicked, hit or pushed around	104	69.2%	21.2%	7.7%	1.9%
Called nasty names, teased or made fun of	109	21.1%	46.8%	15.6%	16.5%
Called nasty names, teased, made fun of my colour/race	95	88.4%	8.4%	2.1%	1.1%
Called nasty names, teased, made fun of my religion	97	87.6%	12.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Called nasty names, teased, made fun of my sexuality	105	28.6%	37.1%	9.5%	24.8%
Have been threatened	104	59.6%	28.8%	7.7%	3.8%
Have been excluded, ignored or purposefully left out of things	105	44.8%	35.2%	7.6%	12.4%
Have had lies or rumours spread about me to make others dislike me	108	38.9%	36.1%	16.7%	8.3%
Have had money or belongings taken or had damage to my property	104	74.0%	16.3%	9.6%	0.0%
Have received nasty text messages or pupils have used mobiles to get at me	103	75.7%	19.4%	2.9%	1.9%

Physical bullying both before AND after they knew I was gay. It's just that kind of school.

It's not anyone in particular. I feel like 'Im singled out for slagging because I'm gay.

In the hallways people tend to slag me and at lunch I have no friends at all.

I am regularly verbally abused in the street. It used to terrify me, but now it doesn't stop me from walking into town.

It's younger years who do it.

People constantly shout at me gay, fag ... and a lot of the guys, joking, ask me for oral sex ... it makes me feel very uncomfortable ... and although they are loud and open in their abuse, no teacher has ever stopped it or drawn attention to it ... its as if its normal, and acceptable!

However, despite the frequency of the verbal and other abuse experienced by respondents at school, the vast majority (90.7%) have persevered through it and have not left school earlier than they wished. However concerns can be expressed at the 10% of respondents who stated they left school earlier than they would have wished, with the inevitable implications for their education, careers and lives at a later stage. Only 18 respondents (17.5%) had sought or experienced support around sexual orientation while at school. Several respondents reported having spoken to a guidance counsellor. Most respondents 72.2% reported that they knew LGBT people in their school.

When asked whether they had been bullied, half of all respondents reported that they had been bullied during the last 3 months; over 30% reported that they had been bullied during the last 5 school days; 17.8% of the respondents reported having been frequently bullied over the past 3 months; and 15% had experienced bullying three or

more times in the last 5 school days. Of those being bullied, almost two-thirds had been bullied for more than 12 months. In O' Moore's nationwide survey of bullying behaviour in Irish schools (O' Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997), 15.6% of post-primary pupils reported having been bullied within the last term.

Of course, we would like to urge caution in attributing excessive significance to this comparison. First, as no questions were asked regarding sexual orientation in O' Moore's nationwide study, we must assume that sample to be a 'mixed' one, although (if the usual incidence rates can be applied in what is, after all, a representative sample in all other respects) a predominantly heterosexual one. Conversely, the present survey of 123 LGBT makes no claims to the representativeness or generalisability of its sample. We note also that the voluntary nature of the present methodology, especially with regard to the on-line survey, would be more likely to encourage people who had been bullied to participate. Additionally, the age ranges of the two surveys do not precisely coincide. However, even with these significant methodological concerns having been noted, it seems likely from the present findings that LGBT people are much more likely to be bullied at school than are their heterosexual peers.

Respondents were asked whether they had told anyone about being bullied and who they would tell if they were being bullied or if they knew of anyone else being bullied. These figures are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. To who respondents would or did report having been bullied

Told/Would Tell	Who did you tell when being bullied ( <i>n</i> = 50) %	Who would you tell if you were being bullied ( <i>n</i> = 123) %	Who would you tell if someone else was being bullied ( <i>n</i> = 123) %
One or more friends	46	56.1	42.3
An adult at school	22	8.9	34.1
Parents/guardians	26	22.0	11.4
I don't know	12	17.1	13.0
I wouldn't tell anybody	30	9.8	4.9
Teacher*	—	17.1	—
Guidance counsellor*	—	16.3	—
Youth worker/ group*	—	15.4	—

\* These alternatives were only presented for who respondents would tell if they were being bullied.

Table 3 documents the fact that friends are most likely to be told about a bullying episode whether it has actually been experienced by the person themselves (46%), or if it might happen to oneself (56.1%) or to someone else (42.3%). These exceeded the figures for parents (26%, 22% and 11.4% respectively) and adults at school (22%, 8.9%, and 34.1% respectively). It is interesting to note that whilst just 8.9% said that they would tell an adult at school if they were being bullied, 34.1% said that they would report on another's behalf; also, that the proportion of those who had been

bullied and had reported this to a teacher (22%) exceeded that of those who said they would do so were they to be bullied (8.9%). It would appear that there was a difference in the resources the sample members perceived when considering what *could* occur in a *hypothetical* situation, and those they *did* utilise when the situation happens *for real*. In a similar vein, less than 10% of respondents reported that they would do nothing in a hypothetical bullying situation; however, in reality, 30% of those who had actually been bullied did not tell anyone.

When asked where they were bullied, the most common place appeared to be in the corridors at school (72% of those bullied). Bullying also took place in the playground/yard and in the school toilets for over half of those bullied. Bullying in the changing rooms/showers was experienced by 26% of those bullied. In addition, 44% of those bullied experienced this while walking to and from school, while 18% were bullied on some form of transport to and from school. Out of the 50 respondents who said they were bullied, the majority were likely to be bullied by someone in their own class (72%) or year (62%). People in younger classes were also likely to be a source of bullying (42%) and less so from older classes (20%).

The respondents were also asked whether their sexual orientation had a negative impact in other areas related to school, 18.7% of respondents reported achieving lower results due to their sexual orientation, and 11.4% experienced truancy, although only 3.3% dropped out of school due to their sexual orientation. In addition, 6.5% of the respondents changed school due to their sexual orientation.

When asked about the perpetrators of bullying, these appeared to be overwhelmingly male, with only two respondents indicating that girls alone had bullied them. This could be a result of the fact that the majority of the respondents were male. The perpetrators were more likely to be part of a group, with 79.2% of bullied respondents indicating that they were bullied by a group of pupils. The bullying was not exclusive to fellow students however, with 20.3% of all respondents indicating that they had been bullied by someone other than a pupil at school. These 'other' perpetrators were stated as being random people, parents, co-workers, boys in the local area and teachers. This bullying by other perpetrators was manifested in both verbal and physical bullying.

## Discussion

Large-scale empirical research studies of bullying behaviour in Ireland that have addressed these issues have revealed that school bullying is a widespread, serious and pervasive issue – around one-in-three primary school students (Minton 2006) and one-in-six post-primary school students (O' Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997) report having been bullied within the last school term/three months. More intensive qualitative research reveals its presence among children in primary schools (Devine 2003, Devine and Kelly 2006, and post-primary schools (Lynch and Lodge 2002). While far less is known about homophobic bullying, or the bullying of school-aged LGBT people, what *is* known marks these phenomena as a cause for significant concern. In the present survey, half of all respondents reported that they had been bullied during the last three months, and over 30% reported that they had been bullied during the last five school days. Frequent bullying was reported by 17.8% of the respondents who said they had been frequently bullied during the past three months (that is to say, once a week or more often) and 15% had experienced bullying

three or more times in their last 5 school days. In other words, whereas O' Moore Kirkham, and Smith (1997), in their nationwide representative sample, recorded one-in-six of the general post-primary school-aged population had been bullied at school within the last three months, the figure recorded in our (admittedly, non-representative) sample of young LGBT post-primary school-aged people was one-in-two.

However, as we have already emphasised, considerable caution must be exercised in comparing the findings of these two studies due to the existence of substantial differences in the nature of the samples, age ranges of participants, and general methodology with specific regard to sampling frames. As was noted above, the current survey used a purposive, self-selecting sample (which, as noted above, raises definite limitations), whereas the survey reported in O' Moore, Kirkham, and Smith (1997) was nationally representative. Nevertheless, we were able to tentatively conclude that it is likely that *LGBT pupils form a particularly 'at-risk' group with regards to bullying within the general school-going population.*

Given this finding, it is arguable that homophobic bullying should be included as a matter of concern in pre-service and in-service teacher training. In terms of the realisation of this assertion, a certain amount of precedent — especially regarding the potential compilation and design of resources — does exist in other countries. In Britain, and also in the United States, a number of projects designed to tackle homophobic abuse in schools have been implemented over the last few years. These have been documented by Bridget (2003), and in Britain include productions such as the Avon Health Promotion Service's *'Beyond a Place: A Practical Guide to Challenging Homophobia in Schools'* (1999), Bolton Homophobic Bullying Forum's *'Tackling Homophobic Bullying in Schools'* (2001), and the *'Schools Out'* website ([www.schools-out.org.uk](http://www.schools-out.org.uk)). The National Union of Teachers (UK) held a seminar on *'Combating Homophobic Bullying'* on 2 April 2002. In the United States, agencies such as GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) and the *Safe Schools Coalition* challenge homophobic bullying and violence ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org) and [www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org) respectively; c.f. Bridget, 2003). Bridget (2003) also cites a useful set of recommendations produced by Mullen (2002), which had been included in Bradford Education's *'Diversity in Practice: Guide for Schools in 2000'*. Among these recommendations (which were made to secondary schools) were the following, which we believe could readily be transferred to the situation in schools in Ireland:

- Challenge homophobic bullying in the same way as other forms of bullying;
- Ensure that there is explicit mention of the unacceptability of homophobic comments, name-calling and aggressive behaviour in the schools guidelines on bullying, behaviour and equal opportunities;
- Include homosexuality in sex education and other discussions that centre around heterosexual choices;
- Include lesbian and gay help-lines on school notice-boards along with other help-lines;
- Make it clear that they acknowledge gay and lesbian pupils within the school community; and,
- Listen to pupils who want to talk about themselves. Young people should never have to feel they are the only one or that they are invisible.

The common-place use of homophobic pejoratives in Irish (Mac an Ghaill 1994, Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin and Conway 2004; O'Moore and Minton 2004), British (Duncan, 1999; Thurlow, 2001) and US (O'Connor 1994) schools has already been outlined. We have also already seen that while not always meant literally (Sharpe 2002; Thurlow 2001; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas 2001) such abuse often has the function of heteronormative policing (Duncan 1999; Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin and Conway 2004) and is always unacceptable (O Moore and Minton 2004). While this distinction was not evident in the results of the current survey,<sup>2</sup> it was contended that two sub-types of homophobic bullying might be discernible. It is also possible that these two sub-types might have different implications for school policy and resource formation. The first sub-type of homophobic bullying we identified, which we termed *heteronormative bullying*, relates to the non-targeted general attitude of homophobia which may permeate any organisation, including schools. As this is related to unthinking and ignorant commentary and behaviour, rather than to attacks directly targeted at LGBT people, the way to combat it would seem to be via education and awareness-raising. Indeed, the recommendations produced by Mullen (2002) cited in Bridget 2003) referred to above would seem to provide a sound framework that would be applicable in schools in the Republic of Ireland.

The second sub-type of homophobic bullying was termed *sexual orientation-based bullying*, and involves the active persecution of persons known to be homosexual, bisexual or transgendered. A concerted effort involving all relevant agencies needs to be made in order to prevent such cowardly and despicable acts. It is very likely that LGBT youth groups will continue to play an important role. However, what is most needed is a societal condemnation and zero tolerance of homophobic violence. Notwithstanding the strong role that parents, the media, legislature and policing can and must play, we can see from our perspective as educators that schools can also have a role in creating a condemnatory attitude towards homophobic violence, and that the key once again is preventative practise. Given the general finding that children can develop prejudicial attitudes at a young age (Santrock 1996) – an age when issues around sexuality are necessarily broached with considerable caution – primary school action on the issue of homophobic bullying might best be made somewhat obliquely, through the encouragement of the general tolerance and celebration of diversity among people (Devine and Kelly 2006).

It can also be stated at this time that a body of knowledge concerning homophobic bullying is slowly growing in Ireland, and a key and more direct tactic in tackling the issue may well be the effective dissemination of this knowledge in post-primary school communities. The SPHE curriculum is, within the context of the Irish education system, a logical and available place to start, and Norman et al.'s (2006) research has shown that SPHE teachers are under no illusions as to the extent and seriousness of homophobic bullying as an issue in schools. However, research conducted in the United States has shown that teachers often do not challenge homophobic epithets (Flannery 1999; cited in Chang and Kleiner, 2001), with researchers in the UK sharing this general finding, and citing common reasons for not addressing the problem as being parental disapproval (18%), a lack of experienced staff (17%) and a lack of policy (16%). In Ireland, Norman et al. (2006) found that although 79% of teachers were aware of verbal homophobic bullying, and 16% were aware of physical bullying related to homophobia, 90% of

the teachers responded that their schools anti-bullying policy did not cover homophobic bullying. Hence, it would seem that *awareness* is not lacking – what teachers may be lacking are the *tools* to deal with the problem. In reality, this will mean increasing training opportunities and resources; however, in the short term, we would urge all schools to update their anti-bullying policies if no explicit mention of homophobic bullying has been made. Pre and in-service professional teacher development also has a role to play.

Finally, it is also important that an inter-agency approach to providing supports to schools continue to be developed. In short, while it has been acknowledged that comparatively little was known concerning the issue until recently, there is every possibility that a substantial increase in expertise concerning the tackling and prevention of homophobic bullying in all its forms in Irish schools could be gained in the near future.

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### Notes

1. Concerning the response to the Department of Education and Science-funded survey of SPHE teachers concerning homophobic bullying in March 2004, Walshe (2004), cited in Norman, Galvin, and McNamara 2006) recorded (in a front page *Irish Independent* newspaper article) that managers and parents are up in arms over a controversial survey about gay, lesbian and bisexual policies in post-primary schools. Furthermore, voluntary school managers felt that some of the questions were intrusive and inappropriate, and that it was decided not to co-operate with it [the survey] until the matter and the purpose of the survey was clarified further. Additionally, he described the Catholic Secondary Parents Association as having called the survey a waste of tax-payers money. The article is re-printed as an appendix in Norman, Galvin, and McNamara 2006: 149.
2. As our sample involved self-identified LGBT people, it is only to be expected that it would be the second proposed sub-type of homophobic bullying, sexual orientation-based bullying that would feature, as it did (witness the large percentage of respondents (71.2%, see Table 2) who reported that they had been called nasty names, teased or made fun of on the grounds of their sexuality). The first proposed sub-type of homophobic bullying, heteronormative bullying, might be expected to feature strongly in studies of bullying in the general population – as indeed (see Duncan, 1999), it does.

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